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ABSTRACT

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) is the accrediting agency for the California Community Colleges. This report offers information regarding the role of faculty in the accreditation process. WASC Accreditation teams--made up of administrators, faculty members, and governing board members--evaluate institutions. The process includes a reading of the institution's catalog, class schedule, and self-study. The team focuses on validating the information in the self-study through interviews with administrators, faculty, staff, and students and through visits to classrooms, offices, and facilities. Team members submit written reports to the team leader, who incorporates these reports into a larger report. The team leader meets privately with the college president so that the president has the opportunity to correct any factual errors. The reports include recommendations. The final report recommends either full accreditation status for the next 6 years, accreditation for a shorter period with a review or revisit to determine whether serious deficiencies have been corrected, probation, or even suspension of accreditation. The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges has worked with the Accrediting Commission to increase faculty participation in the accreditation process. The paper recommends faculty involvement in the writing of college self-studies and involvement with visiting teams. (Author/NB)

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Faculty Role in Accreditation

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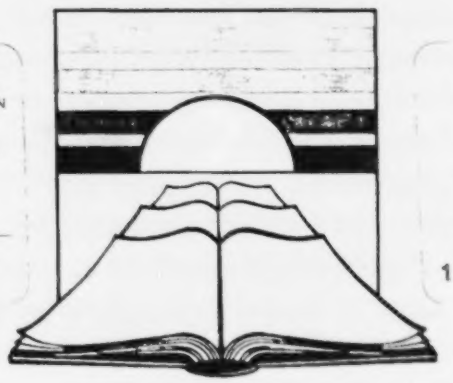

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Academic Senate
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Faculty Participation in Accreditation

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ABSTRACT

This paper is written to provide readers with a brief description of the accrediting process as it relates to the California Community Colleges, with an emphasis on faculty involvement in this process, both at the policy and implementation levels. It includes recommendations of how faculty can participate more fully and effectively. Appendices are included to provide more complete information.

FACULTY PARTICIPATION IN ACCREDITATION

Who is our accrediting agency?

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), which includes the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, is a private, non-profit organization. WASC is supported through assessments to its member institutions. A member institution establishes its status of good standing by being designated as a fully accredited institution by the Commission after it successfully completes accreditation, a process by which institutions are evaluated to determine the degree to which they have established a mission in accordance with the recognized purposes of such institutions, and are fulfilling their avowed mission according to standards of good practice established by the Commission.

Why is the accreditation process important?

While WASC is not a governmental organization, it nevertheless provides the public with a means to recognize institutions of value, those which have met established standards of good practice. Such recognition is essential to prospective students of those institutions and to other institutions who are asked to accept degrees or courses from other institutions. Thus the importance of the accreditation process is considerable.

How is the process carried out?

Accreditation is carried out by visiting teams that evaluate institutions. Members of teams are chosen from a pool of nominees that includes administrators, faculty members, and governing board members from WASC accredited institutions. Nominations come from chief administrators of colleges, academic senate presidents, and other institutional leaders. Team chairs, selected by the Commission, are almost always college presidents. The rest of the team members are from the ranks of administrators, faculty, and governing board members, occasionally with representatives from other state bodies. Several of the team members are faculty. The size of the team is determined by the size and complexity of the institution it is visiting.

The team evaluation begins with a careful reading by each team member of the institution's catalog, class schedule, and -- most importantly -- self-study, which is the institution's comprehensive analysis of the its mission, programs, and responsibilities to the public in its service area. It includes descriptions and assessments of all of its ongoing programs and activities. It also includes the plans that the institution has for improving its programs and services.

The most important analytical and descriptive information in the self-study is organized under ten areas of scrutiny, referred to as *standards*. The standards in the 1996 *Handbook of Accreditation and Policy Manual* are as follows: (1) *Mission and Purposes*,

(2) *Institutional Integrity*,
(3) *Educational Programs*,
(4) *Student Support Services*,

(5) *Information and Learning Resources,*
(6) *Faculty and Staff,*
(7) *Financial Resources,*
(8) *Physical Resources,*
(9) *Governance and Administration*, and
(10) *Institutional Effectiveness.*

If a self-study report is complete and carefully written according to the guidelines set forth in the Commission's *Handbook*, the visiting team focuses on validating the information within the self-study. The team's ultimate goal is to evaluate the educational processes and support services in light of the institution's stated purposes, or mission. To provide guidance to team members, the Commission has published the *Porterfield Statement* (Appendix A), which clearly distinguishes between proper and improper functions of team members.

The visiting team members validate the self-study and evaluate the institution's programs and activities according to standards, or areas enumerated above. Each member of a team is assigned one standard, or sometimes two, on which to investigate and report. To complete this task, team members interview a variety of members of the college community: administrators, faculty, classified employees, and--of course--plenty of students. They also visit classrooms, offices, off-campus facilities, and where ever else college activities are conducted. Team members then write their individual reports on their findings.

Written reports are submitted to the team leader, who incorporates the individual reports into a large report. The team then decides on major recommendations to the college which will help that institution correct significant weaknesses. If one or more members of a committee do not agree with the majority of the team, they may draft for the Commission a minority report, which will accompany the team's final report.

The team leader then reviews the team's preliminary report with the college president to allow for the president to suggest changes and to point out any factual errors in the report that should be corrected. It has been suggested (through resolutions) that the local senate president and one faculty member from the self study team be present at this meeting. And finally, the team leader, with the rest of the team present, presents a summary report to the college community at an exit meeting.

However, the final draft of the report is not completed until ten days following the visit. A copy of this report is sent to each team member, who may concur with the content or suggest changes before it is considered final and sent to the Commission. Of course, as stated above, if members of the team disagree with the findings of the majority of the team, they may file a minority report.

How is the self-study prepared?

The preparation of the self-study ideally involves active participation by those from every segment of the institution: faculty, administrators, governing board members, classified employees, and students. Such involvement will result in a document that reflects the perspectives of all constituencies in the college community.

It is important that the development of the self-study begin well in advance of the team visit; the college should begin its work eighteen months before the team visit.

Strong faculty leadership in the development of the self-study is of utmost importance to its integrity. Title 5 (section 53200-204) clearly indicates that local senate participation in the accreditation process is part of collegial consultation, the cornerstone of shared governance. The local senate should be involved in the development of the self-study plan, including the committee structure. Also the local senate appoints faculty to the self-study committees.

Accordingly, a steering committee, chaired or co-chaired by a faculty member and including representation from the institution's main constituencies, sets a calendar, establishes subcommittees to develop reports, identifies other necessary tasks, and establishes the procedures for completing those tasks. The subcommittees, one for each standard, are chaired by a faculty member or by a faculty member and either an administrator or classified staff person sharing responsibilities. Faculty serving as chairs or co-chairs should be appointed by the local senate (See Title 5, section 53206) in consultation with the college president.

Subcommittees are responsible for developing drafts of the reports for each standard. Each subcommittee should have input from all of the institution's constituencies. More people involved in this work means less each person will need to do. Also, it is very important that each of the school's employees feels that he or she shares responsibility for the development of the self-study.

The Commission will provide to the college preparing its self-study copies of their *Handbook of Accreditation and Policy Manual* and, upon request, samples of recent self-studies from other institutions. The Commission will also send someone to visit your campus to provide an orientation session for the staff. Everyone who will be part of developing the self-study should attend this introduction.

Once the subcommittees are finished with their reports, their work should be edited by an editor (often a member of the English faculty who has been granted reassigned time for this project). The edited draft is carefully reviewed by the steering committee. The entire college community should have an opportunity to read the draft of the self-study before it becomes finalized and delivered to the printer. It is very important that everyone feels that the self-study is a fair and accurate representation of the college's programs and activities.

Why is faculty involvement in the accreditation important?

The stated primary goal of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges is "...to foster educational excellence." *(Handbook of Accreditation and Policy Manual,* 1990 Edition, p.1). This goal is shared with equal enthusiasm by the Academic Senate. Increasingly in California, faculty have been recognized as leaders working collegially with those in other positions. Clearly, faculty are most directly responsible for the delivery of education and support services to those for whom our institutions exist: students. Therefore, faculty have as much interest as any other group in the health of the institutions in which they serve. It is therefore reasonable that faculty have considerable influence in every aspect of the accreditation process. A paper adopted by the Academic Senate at its 1992 spring session entitled *Strengthening the Accreditation Process* (Available from the Senate Office) includes substantial suggestions for increasing faculty participation and influence in many aspects of the accreditation process.

What does the visiting team do when it comes to the campus?

The purpose of the visiting team is to validate the information in the self-study report and to assess the college against the accreditation standards. Team members determine whether this information is accurate and complete. Team members will examine documents that the college provides. More importantly, team members will observe college activities and interview members from all constituencies: students, faculty, other staff, and board members. Then team members write their reports and make recommendations.

When team members are on campus, they should make appointments to interview individuals, speak with groups, visit classes, and observe general activity. Also, time is set aside for anyone from the college community to meet with team members as individuals and provide any information they feel is important. Faculty members can use this time to communicate their perceptions to team members.

Before the team leaves the campus, the team leader meets privately with the college president so that the president has the opportunity to correct any factual errors. The final step in the visit is a public meeting, at which the team leader comments on the team's findings. This report is a summary of the preliminary findings and recommendations of the team.

What is contained in the final report to the Accrediting Commission and what action is taken?

The team leader writes a report to the Accrediting Commission from the reports of individual team members. This report will recommend that the institution be granted full accredited status for the next six years, accreditation for a shorter period with a review or revisit to determine whether serious deficiencies have been corrected, probation, or even suspension of accreditation. After review of the report, the Commission will accept the team's recommendation or modify that recommendation. A college may appeal an unfavorable recommendation.

How can I, as a faculty member, help strengthen the accreditation process?

The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, through a number of its committees, has worked with the Commission to increase faculty participation in the accreditation process, and the Academic Senate will persist in its efforts to help improve the process. Individual faculty members can volunteer to serve on visiting teams or even on the Commission itself; there are presently five faculty seats. Local senates should provide applications and make recommendations for faculty who wish to serve on visiting accreditation teams. Applications are available from the Academic Senate Office, in Sacramento and at the Spring and Fall plenary sessions.

All people who are asked by the Commission to serve on visiting teams are given a one-day workshop to familiarize them with the process. In accordance with a resolution passed at the Spring 1995 session, the Senate will soon begin discussion with the Commission on a plan to enhance the training of faculty members who anticipate serving on their first visiting teams, and also help develop a pool of faculty members who would be strong candidates for serving on visiting teams.

A second very important way that individual faculty members can help strengthen the process is by their involvement in writing their own college's self-studies. As indicated above, faculty members should chair or co-chair with administrators or people from the other constituencies the steering committee and the subcommittees. And faculty members should at least share in editorial prerogative of the self-study report.

Also, faculty members should be vitally involved in the team visit itself. Team members should be invited to senate and other meetings and provide a schedule of meetings to the team leader. They should make themselves available for interviews with team members and be encouraged to be candid in what they report. In addition, the local senate president should be present during the meeting that precedes the exit report, when the visiting team leader goes over the team's preliminary report to determine whether any inaccuracies exist in the report.

Finally, the local senate should fully participate in reviewing and acting on the recommendations in the visiting team's report. The senate president should receive a copy of the report and devise means for working with administrators and other constituencies to act on the recommendations in the report and draft whatever interim reports the Commission requests. In short, the local senate should be involved with all activities that have been precipitated by the team report.

In summary, the responsibilities of the local academic senates in the accreditation process are:

1. Play a substantive role in the development of the self-study plan, including the committee structure.
2. Appoint faculty members to serve on all the self-study plan, including the committee structure.
3. Encourage broad-based faculty participation.
4. Provide a schedule of senate and other faculty committee meetings to the visiting team chair and invite the team members to attend a senate meeting.
5. Have the senate president included in the meeting between the team chair and the college president to review the proposed recommendations for factual accuracy.
6. Receive and review the recommendations in the final report.
7. Develop, through consultation, a plan to respond to the recommendations in the final report.
8. Participate in drafting whatever interim reports are requested by the Accrediting Commission.

APPENDIX A

ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES
Western Association of Schools and Colleges

PORTERFIELD STATEMENT

A TEAM CAREFULLY SELECTED FROM OTHER COMMUNITY COLLEGES
IS COMING TO EVALUATE US

WHAT MUST IT DO?

Reach a decision as to how well, overall, our college is doing what colleges like us are generally expected to do.

Make a judgment as to how well, overall, our college is doing what it claims to do.

Point out to us, and to the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, any notable strengths and weaknesses that could or do significantly affect the education of our students.

Recommend steps we might take to strengthen ourselves.

Evaluate the progress we have made in carrying out the recommendations of previous visiting committees.

Communicate its findings, judgments, and recommendations to the Accrediting Commission, which makes the actual decision on accreditation.

TO THIS END, WHAT WILL IT TRY TO DO?

Become as intimately acquainted with us as circumstances will permit.

Listen to any member of our college community (students or staff) who wishes to be heard. We must take the initiative.

Answer any questions we have about accreditation.

Be helpful rather than punitive.

Assure itself that there has been widespread participation in our self study.

Encourage sound innovation.

Distinguish between limited and individual problems, which must be resolved in other ways, and general problems, which could or do significantly affect the teaching and learning that goes on here.

WHAT WILL IT NOT TRY TO DO?

Visit every class or confer with each staff member, because time does not permit.

Resolve all of our problems. It can't.

WHAT WILL IT TRY NOT TO DO?

Let the biases of individual team members affect its evaluation of us or lead to witch hunting.

Be picayune or become embroiled in intramural conflicts.

Usurp or interfere with the normal functions of faculty senates, professional organizations, the administration, or the governing board.

Prepared by John H. Porterfield. Retired Member of the Teaching Faculty, Diablo Valley College and Former Member, Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges.

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